George Orwell – Eric Arthur Blair (1903-1950)

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on the 25th of June 1903 in Motihari, Bihar, India. Orwell would later describe his initial surroundings as “lower-upper-middle-class” and was born to Richard Walmesley Blair, an Indian civil servant working in the opium department and Ida Mabel Blair. He had two sisters. Orwell’s grandfather was moderately wealthy, being an absentee landlord for some plantations in Jamaica. When Orwell was a one year old, he and his older sister were taken to London by their mother.

The family moved to Shiplake, where Orwell met Jacintha Buddicom. Records from the time indicate he spent his days there shooting, fishing and birdwatching with the Buddicom family. Jacintha Buddicom and Orwell would often dream of becoming famous authors and Orwell would ironically say that he might write a book in the style of H. G. Wells’ ‘A Modern Utopia’.

When Orwell was five, he was sent to a convent school in Henley-on-Thames, run by Roman Catholic French Ursuline nuns. His mother wanted a private education for Orwell, but they were not able to afford the fees without a scholarship. His uncle suggested Cyprian’s School in Eastbourne, East Sussex as he knew the headmaster personally— he then managed to reach a financial agreement with the headmaster for the Blair family to pay only half the normal fee. In September 1911 Orwell went to board at the school and returned only for holidays. He was not aware of the reduced fees himself but noted that he was obviously from a poorer home than the other pupils. He wrote his series of essays ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’ on his experiences at the school. At Cyprians he met Cyril Connolly, who also became a noted author and editor of Horizon magazine, and helped publish many of Orwell’s essays later in life.

During his time at school Blair came second to Connolly in the Harrow History Prize and earned scholarships to Wellington and Eton Colleges. He chose to stay at Cyprians until 1916 in case a place at Eton become available, since a scholarship does not guarantee a place. When a place was still not open for him he applied to Wellington, where he spent the Spring term. In May 1917 a place became available for him as a King’s Scholar at Eton— where he studied until December 1921 where he left at age 18. Orwell would later say Wellington was ”beastly”, but also say he was “interested and happy” at Eton. Orwell was even briefly taught French by Aldous Huxley.

Orwell’s reports were generally unfavourable, showing a neglect for schoolwork. However, he produced a college magazine and helped produce many other publications and participated in the Eton Wall Game—a rugby style game unique to Eton. His parents could not afford to send him to university without another scholarship and felt that due to his poor academic performance that he would not be able to attain another one. They therefore decided he should join the Imperial Police, which eventually turned into the Indian Police Service. To join, he needed to pass the entrance exam, for which he joined a cram school called Craighurst where he worked on his English and History. He passed the exam and came seventh out of the 26 candidates.

Orwell chose a posting in Burma since his maternal grandmother lived in Moulmein. In October 1922 he sailed via the Suez Canal and Ceylon to join the Imperial Police in Burma. A month later he arrived at Rangoon and attended the police training school at Mandalay. After a short stint at Maymyo— a town established as a ‘hill station’, a place where colonial settlers would go to escape the heat due to the town’s elevation. At the beginning of 1924 he was posted to the frontier outpost of Myaungmya in the Irrawaddy Delta at the beginning of 1924. He was later posted further east as a sub-divisional officer to Twante and was responsible for the security for 200,000 people. By the end of 1924 he was promoted to Assistant District Superintendent and was posted to Syriam, close to Rangoon. Here he encountered environmental disaster as the Burmah Oil Company had a refinery there. He described the place as “the surrounding land a barren waste, all vegetation killed off by the fumes of sulphur dioxide pouring out day and night from the stacks of the refinery." However, being near Rangoon, a cosmopolitan port, he was able to catch up to Western culture and eat Western food again. At the end of that year, he was assigned to Katha in Upper Burma, where he contracted dengue fever in 1927. After returning to England on leave, Orwell reappraised his life and decided to leave the police force to be an author. It was about this time that he wrote ‘Burmese Days’, ‘Shooting an Elephant’ and ‘A Hanging’ were written. Orwell left Burma completely fluent in Burmese and with changes to his physical appearance— blue circle tattoos around his knuckles that many poor Burmese in rural areas have that are said to protect against bullets and snake bites.

In early 1927 he moved into London, and by the end of 1927 he had lodgings at Portobello Road. He would often explore London’s poorer East End and experience “the world of poverty and the down-and-outers who inhabit it.” He began to explore ‘slumming’ in the poorer districts and for some time pretended to be a tramp, and recorded his experiences in magazine publications and his book ‘Down and Out in Paris and London’. In the spring of 1928 he moved to Paris and lived in the working class district of Rue du Pot de Fer, and began working on many different pieces of writing, focused mainly on poverty and inequality, all the while undertaking similar ‘sorties’ in Paris. In February 1929 he fell seriously ill and was taken to a free hospital, Hôpital Cochin, where French medical students are trained. His experiences there were the basis for his piece ‘How The Poor Die’ published in 1946. Later, after recovery, he undertook several menial jobs such as dishwashing in famous restaurants and also described these experiences in Down and Out.

In December 1929 after two years spent in Paris, Orwell returned to Southwold. Here he returned to a more domestic life living with his parents again but kept on writing and making regular trips to the rougher areas of London. He house cleaned during this time and wrote for various magazines. Blair ended the year of 1931 by deliberately getting detained for being drunk and disorderly, but the police did not perceive it to be an imprisonable offense so he was released after two days in the cell.

In April 1932 Blair became a teacher at The Hawthorns High School, a prep school for boys in Hayes, West London. At the end of the summer term in 1932, Blair returned to Southwold, where his parents had used a legacy to buy their own home. In August, he prepared for the publication of his book, now known as Down and Out in Paris and London. He wished to publish under a different name in order to avoid any embarrassment to his family over his time as a "tramp". He wrote to his publisher suggesting the pseudonyms P. S. Burton (a name he used when tramping), Kenneth Miles, George Orwell, and H. Lewis Allways. He finally adopted the nom de plume George Orwell because, as he told Eleanor Jacques, "It is a good round English name." In the summer of 1933 Blair left Hawthorns to become a teacher at Frays College, in Uxbridge, West London.

He acquired a motorcycle and took trips through the surrounding countryside. On one of these expeditions he became soaked and caught a chill that developed into pneumonia. He was taken to Uxbridge Cottage Hospital, where for a time his life was believed to be in danger. When he was discharged in January 1934, he returned to Southwold to convalesce and, supported by his parents, never returned to teaching.

In October 1934 he left for London for a job at Booklovers' Corner, a second-hand bookshop in Hampstead run by Francis and Myfanwy Westrope, who were friends of Nellie Limouzin in the Esperanto movement. Blair worked at the shop in the afternoons and had his mornings free to write and his evenings free to socialise. These experiences provided background for the novel Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936). By October 1935 his flatmates had moved out and he was struggling to pay the rent on his own. He remained until the end of January 1936, when he stopped working at Booklovers' Corner.

At this time, his publisher suggested Orwell spend a short time investigating social conditions in economically depressed northern England. On 31 January 1936, Orwell set out by public transport and on foot, reaching Manchester via Coventry, Stafford, the Potteries and Macclesfield. At Wigan, he visited many homes to see how people lived, took detailed notes of housing conditions and wages earned, went down Bryn Hall coal mine, and used the local public library to consult public health records and reports on working conditions in mines. As well as visiting mines, including Grimethorpe, and observing social conditions, he attended meetings of the Communist Party and of Oswald Mosley – "his speech the usual claptrap—The blame for everything was put upon mysterious international gangs of Jews" – where he saw the tactics of the Blackshirts – "one is liable to get both a hammering and a fine for asking a question which Mosley finds it difficult to answer."

The result of his journeys through the north was The Road to Wigan Pier, published by Gollancz for the Left Book Club in 1937. Orwell's research for The Road to Wigan Pier led to him being placed under surveillance by the Special Branch in 1936, for 12 years, until one year before the publication of Nineteen Eighty-Four. Orwell married Eileen O'Shaughnessy on 9 June 1936. Shortly afterwards, the political crisis began in Spain and Orwell followed developments there closely. At the end of the year, concerned by Francisco Franco's military uprising, (supported by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and local groups such as Falange), Orwell decided to go to Spain to take part in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side.